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# Lenape (“Delaware”) Mail Carriers and the Origins of the US Postal Service

*Marshall Joseph Becker*

More than simply a pleasant means for individuals to communicate over long distances, during the colonial period an efficient and reliable mail service had distinct military and political value. Early histories of the United States Postal Service (USPS) offer useful surveys of the postal systems developed by immigrant Europeans, but Native forerunners of the USPS generally are not considered.<sup>1</sup> Formal histories of the USPS, first written over 130 years ago, at best only briefly note Native participation. Some recent texts include references to Native mail carriers, but view all these peoples, and their reliability in delivering the mail, as being alike.<sup>2</sup> Closer examination of Lenape participation in the Middle Atlantic mail system during the Dutch period reveals significant cultural differences among the Native tribes regarding their involvement with the mail, and shows that the Lenape created high standards of service that became a USPS historical tradition. The writings of English, Dutch, Swedish, and French colonial administrators provide multiple views of the Lenape and other Native peoples in their role as mail carriers and reveal why the Lenape were rated as the best. This diversity of comments, amplified by statements from various factions within these linguistic groups, all agree that the Lenape were the preferred carriers.<sup>3</sup> These records enable us to compare elements of the mail service from the perspectives of the Native carriers as well as the colonials who used these services.

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MARSHALL JOSEPH BECKER, professor emeritus in anthropology at West Chester University, has studied the Native peoples of the Delaware River and Delaware Bay regions for more than forty-five years. Trained at the University of Pennsylvania in four fields of anthropology, he applies multiple anthropological approaches to gather information about the Lenape and their neighbors, often called together “Delaware Indians.” With research supported by grants from the NSF, NEH, American Philosophical Society, National Geographic Society and Social Science Research Council, he has published widely on the Lenape and other Native Americans in scholarly as well as popular journals.

In the Delaware Valley, the Lenape were singled out as reliable and efficient carriers of mail at a very early date. Their role in this service began in 1640 and was still in demand after the 1660s. Carrying mail was one of more than a dozen economic activities used by the Lenape to gain access to European goods prior to 1660.<sup>4</sup> These many enterprises effectively provided the Lenape with integration into the early colonial economic system.<sup>5</sup> For example, during these decades the Lenape also amplified their maize cultivation to sell the surplus to the colonists.<sup>6</sup> Traditional Lenape focused on the “harvesting” of anadromous fish.<sup>7</sup> While fish provided the food basic to Lenape lifeways and their cultural traditions, these people also wanted the kinds of luxury goods that were abundantly available to the tribes that acted as brokers in the transnational pelt trade. The primary interest of these Native peoples was woolen cloth, but they were also interested in an extraordinary range of other imported goods that became available through a number of enterprises.<sup>8</sup>

The efforts of Native mail carriers, who ran their routes on foot, also provide us with a broad perspective on the realities of indigenous life and how these peoples integrated European activities into their own separate systems for making a living. Popular images of European impact generally describe the many different Native cultures as if they were a single entity, all passive victims of imperialistic invaders. As recent scholarship demonstrates, this is a deeply flawed view. Through detailed studies of the three hundred years of interaction between each distinct Native culture and a surprisingly diverse array of immigrant peoples, the post-contact realities of each tribe’s responses are being delineated.<sup>9</sup>

The continuity of each specific Native culture invariably relates to various unique aspects of each specific tribal situation. Developing and expanding throughout the first half of the sixteenth century, the pelt trade was controlled by the Iroquois Confederacy (Great Lakes and across present New York) and the Susquehannock Confederacy (Northern Plains and up the Ohio to the Susquehanna and Potomac Rivers).<sup>10</sup> In the history of the Lenape of southeastern Pennsylvania, as well as many other tribes in the Middle Atlantic and Northeast, the Native tribes that came to dominate the pelt trade played a critical role. The Lenape remained successful foragers in their home territory for more than 230 years (circa 1500–1730). After 1660, the opportunity to become major players in the pelt trade lured most of them into newly opened Susquehannock territory and even out to the regions beyond the western frontier of that confederacy.

## MAIL SERVICE IN THE NORTHEAST

Given traditional Native traveling and trade, knowledge of nearby peoples, routes, and possible means of transport, colonial governments presumably were predisposed to utilize Native carriers. For cultural reasons yet to be explained, the Lenape appear to have been the most reliable carriers of mail in the region.<sup>11</sup> Early colonists were aware that Lenape promises to deliver mail and return were “binding” and that their precision in these affairs could be counted upon.<sup>12</sup> As early as 1625 Johannes De Laet observed, “they ask only a small remuneration for what they do, and will make very long journeys in a short time with greater fidelity than could be justly expected from

such a barbarous people.”<sup>13</sup> Although De Laet never visited the Delaware River area, his description applies only to the Lenape.<sup>14</sup>

This dangerous activity involved passing through the territories of at least two other Native tribes. The overland route from Dutch fortified locations on the lower Delaware River to Fort Amsterdam on Manhattan Island was a “path” not known by early colonists and remained daunting to travelers as late as 1679. The route across New Jersey had been of interest to Isaack de Rasière.<sup>15</sup> In 1626 he was sent to Fort Amsterdam as *Opper Koopman* (chief trading agent) for the Dutch West India Company, and Secretary to Peter Minuit. His major task was to secure trade between the Dutch and those tribes controlling the flow of peltry: the Susquehannock Confederacy of central Pennsylvania and the Five Nations across central New York. His brief stay has provided us with some important documents, filled with insights into Native cultures and affairs. In 1626 the Lenape identified as “Isaacq” had offered to show de Rasière where the Minquas (Susquehannock) lived and had houses full of peltry.<sup>16</sup> On September 23, 1626 de Rasière wrote home from “Manhattes” to describe a visit that had been paid by a Susquehannock delegation to Fort Amsterdam. They had come to establish or recommit to a trade route to deliver peltry to the Delaware River, to meet there with Dutch traders sailing down from Manhattan Island. The Susquehannock established a place where they could meet the Dutch on the Delaware (South) River.<sup>17</sup>

De Rasière indicated that the Susquehannock had arrived at Fort Amsterdam using the same route followed by Native “runners.” They crossed the South (Delaware) River at the falls, now Trenton at the place called Mechechasou.<sup>18</sup> In a letter written about 1628, after he had returned to the Netherlands, De Rasière included a detailed description of the water features surrounding Manhattan Island, but he had only a distant view of the “South River, in the neighborhood of the Sancicans” where hostilities among the Natives were so terrible that “I have not been able to learn the exact distance; so that when we wish to send letters overland, they (the Natives) take their way across the bay and have the letters carried forward by others, unless one amongst them may happen to be on friendly terms, and who might venture to go there.”<sup>19</sup>

The important question here is, to whom on the South River were these letters being sent prior to 1627 and 1628? After arriving on Manhattan in 1626, De Rasière suggested that the Dutch build a fort on the South River, but he may have meant the strengthening of an existing earthworks or other intermittently occupied construction, possibly Fort Nassau.<sup>20</sup> This reference to sending letters overland predates the Dutch purchase of Swanendale in 1629.<sup>21</sup> Thus De Rasière may have been sending mail to the Dutch fort on present Burlington Island.<sup>22</sup> After a more substantial fort had been constructed there, and staffed year round, a reliable mail service was continued to coordinate activities. As yet we have no letter or document originating at Fort Nassau (or the supposed Fort Wilhelmus) on the South River, or a letter specifically addressed to anyone on the South River in the 1620s.

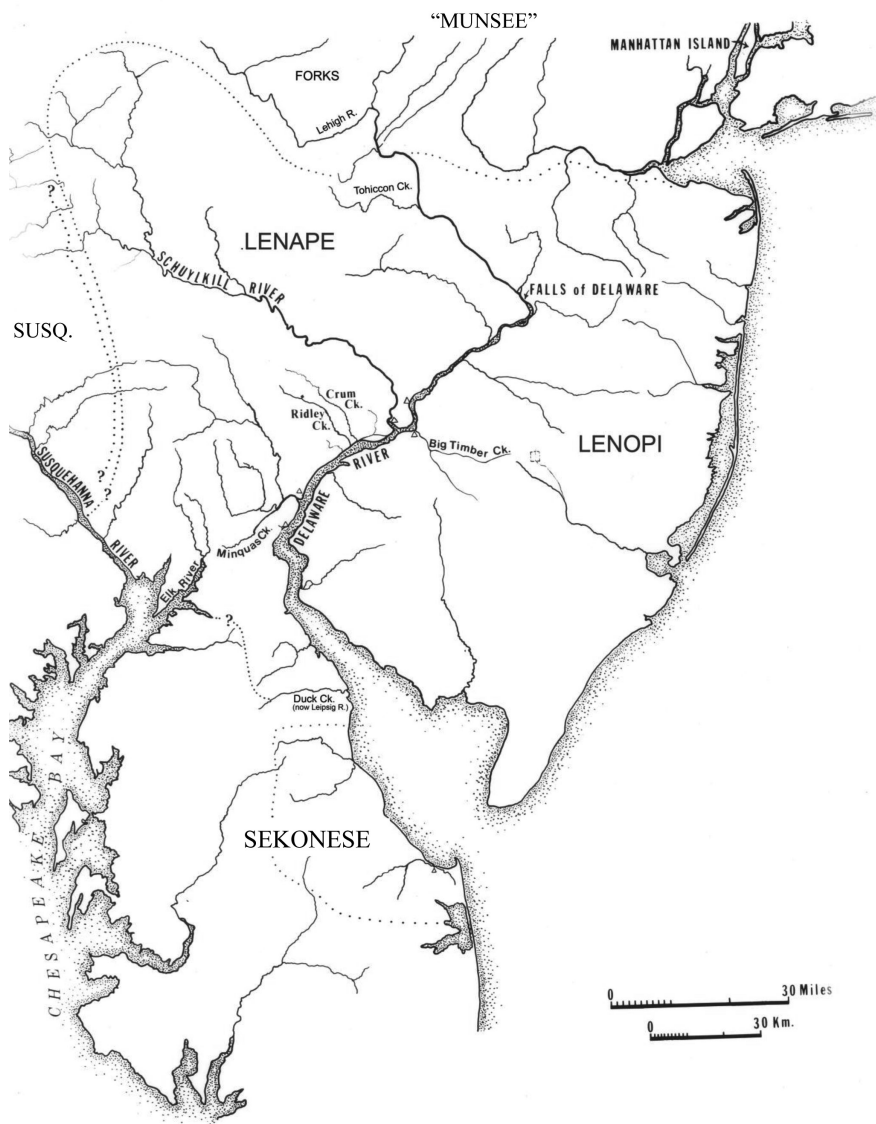
The Dutch at Fort New Amsterdam also developed an abundant correspondence with the multiplying English coastal colonies of New Haven, Providence, and Boston. Letters along those routes were largely if not entirely carried by ship. I was unable to

find a single letter carried by a Native on the route from New Amsterdam to Boston for the period from 1647 to 1653.<sup>23</sup>

The overland mail route used by Natives between New Amsterdam and the Dutch outposts on the South River were established soon after the Dutch erected a trading location on Burlington Island, circa 1623 to 1625. In 1634, Thomas Yong wrote an account of the region in which he remarked on the speed of communication across this area.<sup>24</sup> Reliable postal runners were more dependable than ships on this route.<sup>25</sup> They were not deterred by winter freezing of the rivers or stormy conditions. During this period, the height of the Little Ice Age, frozen rivers completely stopped all shipping but actually provided unimpeded paths for hearty runners. Trade and the postal services were robust at this early period in colonial history, but overland travel remained difficult. Payment was commonly made at the end of a round-trip delivery. Not surprisingly, a similar need for postal services was felt throughout the sundry colonies springing up in New England at that time. They were less successful until much later (see table). We do not have an idea of the number of letters sent between New Amsterdam and other locations, the frequency of attempts, or the success of delivery; we do know that the ocean crossing was particularly prone to loss of letters, while Native runners almost never failed to deliver the mail.<sup>26</sup>

TABLE 1  
LOCATIONS ON THE SOUTH RIVER—MAILING ADDRESSES

Fort Nassau	Dutchprobably on <i>Hooghe Eyland</i> (also Verhulsten or Burlington Island)	ca. 1623/1626 to 1651; dismantled and abandoned	commonly confused with a Fort Wilhelmus
“Swanendale” or “Swansdale” Settlement	Dutchnow area of Lewes, Delaware	June 1, 1629 to 1631	(see Kent 1979: 5, 7-9).
Fortress Christina (became Fort Altena)	Swedish Wilmington, Delaware	1638	
	Dutch	1655	abandoned in 1664
Printzhof (Fort Nya Gottenburg)	Swedish(Tinicum Island, PA)	1643	(see Becker 1979, 1999)
Fort Casimir, aka Ft. Trinity (1654) New Amstel 1655) New Castle (1664)	Dutch	1651; possibly using materials from Ft. Nassau	Fort Casimir was capturedand renamed Fort Trinity by the Swedes in 1654
Fort Trinity (Trefaldighet)	Swedish		Fort Trinity retaken and renamed by the Dutch in 1655
New Amstel	Dutch		New Amstel taken over by English in 1664
New Castle	English		(see Colonial Society of Pennsylvania, 1904)



**FIGURE 1.** The lower Delaware Valley region, identifying the aboriginal locations of the Lenape, Lenopi, Sekonese, and Susquehannock. The people identified as “Munsee,” resident in the northwestern New Jersey highlands area after 1650, represent relocated members of the Esopus, Wiechquaeskeck (“Raritan”), and Wapping tribes. These were the peoples who had occupied Manhattan Island and both sides of the lower Hudson River at the time of contact and in the early colonial period. Map by the author.

The postal run across New Jersey was relatively easy, but getting to Manhattan Island from the New Jersey side was another matter. The Jasper Danckaerts journal of 1679–1680 indicates the many ways one could get on and off Manhattan Island, ways that did not exist in the 1620s.<sup>27</sup> Getting to Staten Island was more of a problem, as the open water usually required a good boat. From the other side of Staten Island, it was easier to cross the “Kil van Kol” (or achter Kol), located in the area of the present Elizabethtown; Andros reports making this trip in 1673.<sup>28</sup> A runner could go around this region and cross the Hudson further north, by upper Manhattan, using the tides to provide propulsion. Danckaerts’ slow and complicated trip to the South River, which he resolved to make on October 26, 1679, began when he crossed the North River at Gamoenepaen, now Communipaw. The problems he faced in 1679 reveal that this was not a simple task, as even at that late date there were no formal roads. Danckaerts joined some Quakers traveling by land beyond the Kil achter Kol and Woodbridge, New Jersey. They proceeded by horse as far as Piscataway, where they crossed the Millstone River at the falls and reached the Delaware River days later, probably at Mechechasou.<sup>29</sup>

## COMMUNICATIONS BETWEEN THE NORTH AND SOUTH RIVERS

The establishment of a Dutch trading post on Burlington Island, begun perhaps as early as 1623, and in 1629 their purchase of a tract of land for a whaling station near present Lewes, Delaware, established the *de facto* hegemony of the Dutch on the South River.<sup>30</sup> In the Delaware River and Bay area, peltry derived only from local production. Because it was not a part of the cross-continental pelt trade at this time, the area became important only after the Susquehannock extended their trade route east to the South River. In 1638 the Swedes established Fortress Christina (presently Wilmington), but failed to enter the pelt trade. The Dutch always paid the highest prices for peltry, and the undercapitalized Swedes never had a chance of gaining a share of the market.<sup>31</sup>

By the 1640s overland communication was well established between Peter Stuyvesant, the Dutch Director General at Fort Amsterdam, and the Dutch commander Andreas Hudde of Fort Casimir at New Amstel (later Newcastle, Delaware).<sup>32</sup> News of the arrival of each of the few Swedish ships that reached the New Amstel colony was reported to the Dutch at Fort Amsterdam within days. The value of Lenape runners was well known to the Swedish governors, who employed them in their communications with the Dutch and as well as the Minquas, also known as Susquehannock.<sup>33</sup> Early in 1648 Stuyvesant instructed Hudde to prohibit Christians from traveling overland “for reasons known to us.”<sup>34</sup> The letter was carried by an Indian from “Sanghikans,” the area above the falls of Delaware and a crossing point for the river. In a letter sent on April 17, 1648, Stuyvesant requested that a trusted South River (Lenape) Indian or two, along with two Minquas (Susquehannock) be dispatched as guides to help find the best route to Sanghikans, where he knew a crossing to be located. The implication



is that an effective trade route would be established, perhaps including the construction of a road (here we note that a road has value for military reasons as well as for trade).

On May 28, 1648, Stuyvesant wrote to Hudde to report that there were no trade goods in stock in Fort Amsterdam. One month later Stuyvesant wrote another letter indicating that he feared the English were preparing “to seize control of the South River.”<sup>35</sup> On May 28, 1654, Peter Jochim traveled up to Manhattan with a Lenape guide called Taques.<sup>36</sup> Jochim appears to have remained at Fort Amsterdam, but on June 25 Taques returned to Fort Beversrede with a letter regarding Dutch merchants who wanted to provide goods to the Swedes. The Swedes were then growing significant amounts of tobacco, but were having difficulty placing it on ships to Europe. The Dutch could provide them with the needed transport service, as well as with scarce European goods.

During the 1650s the English increasingly challenged the Dutch in the Northeast, who in turn became concerned with the allegiances of the Swedes within their area of hegemony. On August 26, 1655 (New Style calendar, or September 5 Old Style), a small Dutch fleet set sail from Fort Amsterdam to conquer the Swedish colony. On August 30, 1655, a warning had reached New Sweden via a “*vilde*” (Native), but the Swedes could do little to avoid or defend against an attack.<sup>37</sup> After the Dutch fleet reached the Delaware River, a Lenape brought the Swedes a letter from Stuyvesant. From his base at Fort Casimir, Stuyvesant supervised the siege of “Fort Christina (which was a small and feeble work, and lay upon low ground, and could be commanded from the surrounding heights),”<sup>38</sup> and during the siege Stuyvesant sent a letter demanding surrender via an Indian, who then returned with a written reply. Dahlgren and Norman note that “*en Indian*” carried more than one message to the Swedes during the siege.<sup>39</sup> During this period the Swedes at Christina “labored with all our might, by night and by day, in strengthening the ramparts, and filling gabions,” while the Dutch pillaged the countryside.<sup>40</sup> The Swedes soon capitulated to the small expeditionary force and became subject to the Dutch. Fortress Christina then became Altena (see table). During this period the Lenape continued to be the principal carriers of mail along and from the South River.<sup>41</sup>

## THROUGH SLEET AND SNOW, AND MORE WAR

Rapid transport of mail was a difficult task, and the hazards of war elevated the challenge even further. The Dutch capture of New Sweden provided some employment opportunities for the Lenape. In addition, as Dutch control of the region was threatened by English expansion, Native groups in this area became more demanding and much more hostile. Many Native groups took advantage of the weakening abilities of the Dutch as they made efforts to defend against the inevitable English takeover. The rapidly accelerating climate of violence enabled raiding parties from several tribes to create difficulties throughout the region. The possibility of death added to the basic physical difficulty of carrying the mail. Costs rose, and sometimes carriers were not to be found at any price.



The year 1659 began a period of particular difficulty in relations with the Native peoples. During the fall of 1659, a refugee population from Connecticut that became known as the “Raritans” fled from their new home in the Raritan Valley in fear of Indians from Manhattan.<sup>42</sup> The Katskil were annoyed with the troublesome Esopus. News of the first Esopus War, begun in September of 1659, soon reached the South River. Having heard of Indian attacks on Staten Island and at Gamoenepae, in his capacity as leader of the West India Company located at New Amstel (soon to become New Castle), on September 9 and 12, 1659, Willem Beeckman sent two letters to Fort Amsterdam, both carried by Indians. Beeckman stated that he found the Lenape to be the most reliable carriers. A colonial also traveled with the runner bearing the September 12 letter but when this pair reached Meggeckosjou, the local Indians advised them both to turn back.<sup>43</sup> These problems delayed Beeckman’s earlier letter sent on September 9 for nine days; it arrived in Fort Amsterdam on September 18. In response, three barks with sixty men were sent from Manhattan on September 23 in order to join the Dutch from Altena (formerly Christina) who were moving up to Mekkeksjouw to attack the Esopus from the south.<sup>44</sup>

On December 3, 1659 (December 13 n.s.), Beeckman gave a letter to be sent north to Stuyvesant to Andreas Hudde, who was on his way to Mekkeksjouw (“Meggeckosjou”). Hudde “promised me to send over the said letter by a savage” (*vilde*).<sup>45</sup> Esopus raiding had closed the North River (Hudson) to trade, but on December 11, 1659, in the middle of this ten-month “war,” Derck Smitt visited the Esopus to make a trade deal, with the result that the Esopus were permitted to trade maize and venison at Fort Amsterdam. The treaty was signed over the following days. Beeckman also wrote to Stuyvesant on December 12, 1659, sending his letter “By the Galiot New-Amstel”; the date of its arrival at New Amsterdam is not known.<sup>46</sup> On December 28, 1659, Derck Smitt sent a second letter indicating that a Maquaas (Mohawk) had brought a message from Fort Orange down to the area of the Esopus. This Maquaas carried a letter for Smitt that stated the Esopus were still withholding grain.<sup>47</sup>

Mail carried from Fort Amsterdam up the Hudson and across to the interior was less regular and the carriers are rarely identified, but nonetheless this route should be studied as a separate “postal” system.

In January of 1660 agreements were made with four unnamed Indians to carry mail, but their tribal affiliations are not given. Their failure at their first assignment suggests that they were not Lenape. On January 14, 1660, still in the middle of the First Esopus War, a resident at New Amstel (Fort Casimir), sent a letter to Stuyvesant. This document has been damaged and now is difficult to read. The surviving text is near the end of the document, where payment to the carrier was generally noted, and reads “Indian has agreed to two pieces [fathoms?] of cloth, two clouts, two lbs. of powder, . . . staves of lead and two knives; however . . . New Amstel agreed to pay.”<sup>48</sup> This was an exorbitant price—more than ten times the usual rate—reflecting the extent of danger involved during this period. Beeckman’s letter to Stuyvesant of January 25, 1660 confirms that there was a problem with the letter of January 14. The letter of the 25th (February 3, n.s.) indicates that Beeckman could only get “this one”

Native to carry this document. Beeckman asks Stuyvesant to pay the bearer nothing, since payment had been arranged be made only when the Native returned with a reply from Fort Amsterdam.<sup>49</sup>

By July of 1660 the first Esopus War had ended, but none of the core problems had been resolved. The truce allowed the mail to flow. The increased volume of mail reflects the tensions within this Dutch region. On September 4, 1660, the Dutch at Altena sent a message to New Amsterdam by a Native stating that “this goes with the letter of Peter Mayer (who dispatched this Indian).” Mattheus Capito sent a letter on October 8, 1660 to Director General Stuyvesant on Manhattan, noting “by this Indian sent express” and including the common request “that you will transmit [an answer] by this [same] Indian, as soon as possible.” On December 24, 1660, Willem Beeckman wrote to Petrus Stuyvesant, dispatching it with a Native on Christmas Day with the usual note concerning payment of “his remuneration here upon his return.”<sup>50</sup>

Stuyvesant posted a reply to Beeckman on December 30, 1660, which arrived on January 12, 1661, by a different carrier. The second carrier, also a Lenape, brought the information that the original bearer of the letter sent north on December 25 was still at Passajongh. He had taken ill during the return trip and took shelter among the Finns who lived near the Lenape summer station at Passajongh. There the original carrier transferred the return letter to a kinsman who completed the trip. Two days later, on January 14, 1661 another letter to New Amsterdam was posted via a Native, and yet another on February 15 that bore news of the killing of an Englishman on the South River.<sup>51</sup>

In 1661 a letter containing comments on the Esopus War was sent in the care of a “Minquas [Susquehannock] Sakima” who was passing through Lenape territory on his way to Manhattan, presumably on his own business but possibly on a diplomatic mission. Minquas did not commonly travel in the coastal regions. Reference also is made to an Indian who was given a letter to carry and wanted to leave with the tide.<sup>52</sup> Whether he wished to use the tide to cross the river or go up along it is not indicated. This observation, however, helps us to understand how Native carriers could be so efficient. An Indian carrying letters from the South River on July 11, 1662 was paid one and one-half pounds of powder. Only one pound was paid to a runner coming from the South River on September 22, 1662.<sup>53</sup> During the period of Native wars in the New Amsterdam area, Mohawk runners may have been used to replace Lenape carriers on some routes to the south of the Hudson Valley. For the Mohawk, cultural and political benefits may have outweighed the dangers that then deterred Lenape carriers.

The many problems in 1659 and 1660, felt by colonists and Natives alike, extended beyond the pivotal South River settlements. The Five Nations Iroquois, having exterminated the Erie in the early 1650s, then had only one near neighbor surviving their policy of systematic annihilation. The Susquehannock Confederacy, whose members controlled the pelt trade across Pennsylvania and west beyond the Ohio River, were the only other powerful Native polity remaining in the region. The Susquehannock pelt trade was important to the English Maryland colony, stimulating them to provide significant aid to their trading partners. In the 1660s the Dutch also sought allies

among the Susquehannock, and vice versa. The Susquehannock prospered when they could play the Dutch off against the English. With the English about to take control of the region, that advantage would be lost. In fact, within eleven years after the English took control of this region, the Marylanders double-crossed their Native "allies" and allowed the Five Nations Iroquois to destroy the Susquehannock Confederacy.

But on May 16, 1661, the Maryland colony signed "Articles of peace and amity concluded" with "the Sasqsahannough Indians" as represented by elders of the five confederated tribes in central Pennsylvania, and two important families, possibly representing the moieties of the Susquehannock people. This document describes the arrangements made to build a European-style palisaded fortification for the Susquehannock. Notably, Article Six (of nine) instructs the Indians "That there shall be six Indians appointed by the Sasquesahannoughs to be ready to carry letters between the Capt of the English at the forte, and Collonell Utyes howse, and from thence to the forte againe, to which End two of them shall always be vpon Palmers Iland."<sup>54</sup> These Indian carriers provided a regular line of communication between the Maryland colony and the Native fortification recently erected in central Pennsylvania. These six were appointed specifically to carry messages between Captain Odber at the new Susquehannock fort and Colonel Utye's house on Palmers Island, at the northern aspect of the Maryland colony. Two of the six Native messengers were to be at Palmers Island at all times.<sup>55</sup>

We do not know whether any or all of the six carriers were Lenape, but it is possible that they were. By 1660, many Lenape had already relocated to the west and were living in groups among the Susquehannock villages. One of the problems of running the mail in 1661 was the conflict between the English (Marylanders) and the Lenape. The Lenape then were resident under Dutch hegemony and were their de facto allies, leading the English to oppose them. This was all taking place before the English conquered the Dutch colony in 1664, and long before the northern boundary of the Maryland colony had been established.<sup>56</sup>

On May 4, 1661, as the Marylanders and the Susquehannock were negotiating a treaty, some "River Indians" killed four Europeans, three English and one Dutch, in the southern parts of Dutch territory. The murderers were Lenapi, from the east side of the river, but in any case both the Lenape from the west side of the river and their neighbors were lying low following the attack.<sup>57</sup> As a consequence, Beeckman could not find any Lenape to carry mail at this time to report these murders to his superiors.<sup>58</sup> Whether the Lenape did not wish to cooperate in matters relating to their own people or whether they were responding to the general climate of violence by refusing to carry mail is not evident. On May 20, 1661, a letter was dispatched from New Amstel, carried by "Indians," but to whom it was sent is not certain.<sup>59</sup> On the 27th, nine days after he had gotten word of the killing, Beeckman finally found a carrier to go to Manhattan. He immediately posted a letter reporting that he had received a letter from the Governor of Maryland on May 26, carried by a Minquas who was not willing to wait the brief time that it would have taken to send a reply to Maryland.<sup>60</sup> Beeckman indicated that "I have promised the bearer, that he will receive from your

Honble Worships a piece of cloth and a pair of socks, provided he brings over this letter in 4 or 5 days at the utmost.”<sup>61</sup>

Trips from the South River north up to Fort Amsterdam could also be made by Dutch West India Company yachts. However, the expense of sending a yacht to carry a single letter was considerable and they were not as fast or as reliable as runners, especially when weather conditions impeded a voyage. A report of May 31, 1661 emphasizes the Dutch problems with hiring the Esopus and other local Native groups as mail carriers because of their fear of an English invasion of the South River area: “The Indians here are very fearful of the coming of the English. For some days they met near Passajongh” where the several bands were collecting seawan (wampum) to present to the Minquas (Susquehannock) to ask them to mediate the payment of wergild by the Lenape for some killings of which they were accused. On June 10, 1661, the Dutch again reported “These River Chiefs do not trust the English.” This mistrust made it difficult for the Dutch to send mail “because we could not hire an Indian.”<sup>62</sup> Although the collective term “River Chiefs” is sometimes used by the Dutch for leaders on both sides of the river, clearly they could distinguish between the Lenape on the west side of the river and the less cooperative Lenopi on the east side of the river (see page 111 and endnote 84).

On September 13, 1661, Pieter Alrichs and some Lenape elders were sent to see the Governor of Maryland about negotiating a peace between the Dutch and their Native allies and the Marylanders.<sup>63</sup> Alrichs reported becoming separated from these Natives and the mission was aborted. No runners could be found at that time to relay any of this information to New Amsterdam. On September 21, 1661, Willem Beeckman, then at Altena, wrote a letter to Peter Stuyvesant at New Amsterdam explaining that since “no Indian [is] to be found here at Altena, I have then [sent] this [letter] up with Peter Kock, one [of] our magistrates, in order to hire an Indian from there [probably Nevesinck, NJ]. I advised him to promise receipt of payment upon returning so that the trip would be expedited.”<sup>64</sup> This message, with “By an Indian” written on the sheet, may have made the rounds of the various Lenape still resident in the Passajongh area. On September 30 this document was returned because no Native could be found to carry it.<sup>65</sup> The 1661 mail problem continued until October 26, when, perhaps in desperation, a boat was used to send letters to New Amsterdam.<sup>66</sup> Beeckman’s letter of that date included the earlier one, with the comment, “My Lords, the enclosed was returned on the 30th of September because we could not hire an Indian.”<sup>67</sup>

Although problems with the mail were not the only reason, the Dutch at Fort Amstel also sent a boat on October 26 up to the Indians resident at Passajongh and elsewhere “with the request to pay us a visit” at Altena. This call for a conference was intended only for Lenape, the reliable post carriers, but “only one [Native] appeared and he lives on the east side of this river.”<sup>68</sup> The person who did attend was a Lenopi who may have been passing through, rather than answering the call. This call for a conference also repeated the belief that “Senneca” (the term used both for the tribe and the Five Nations as a collective) had killed twelve River Indians living north of the Swedish settlements. A note that the dead were among those allied with the Minquas suggests the probability that those killed were Lenape. By the end of October the

bands may have dispersed for winter hunting, but they also may have been avoiding the general situation. Between the conflict at the Esopus, Five Nations raiding in Pennsylvania, and reports of disease, the Lenape did well to avoid interactions with colonists. The pelt trade was severely disrupted and mail service became erratic.

The Dutch commander at Altena continued to have communications problems into the next year. On February 2, 1662 he sent a message to New Amsterdam, but it had not arrived by February 6. In February the captain of a boat in need of a port clearance document could not secure one. An offer was made to send a Native to Manhattan for one "for quicker dispatch." I infer the letters Stuyvesant sent on February 25 and 28 from Manhattan, arriving on March 4 and 7, were carried by Indians, but this is not certain. The seven-day interval may have been annoying to Dutch leaders, who had come to expect next-day delivery. In June of 1662, mail was sent by boat to Manhattan in only four days. By December a regular service by sea seems to have been initiated.<sup>69</sup>

The Dutch also noted that the "*Vilde*" were off to do their winter hunting, so they did not expect overland messengers to be available until they returned. Winter hunting had not been a problem for the mail service in previous years because there was always someone available to make the journey. But by 1660 many enterprising Lenape had permanently located their area of activity to the west, allying with the Susquehannock to gain access to the lucrative pelt trade. The stresses on the Susquehannock, who were then "hard beset by the Sinnecus," contributed to their search for allies.<sup>70</sup> This period began the days of power and glory for the Lenape, who gained considerable income and political autonomy from their participation in the pelt trade.<sup>71</sup> Through the pelt trade they could secure considerable quantities of European goods without running the risks of travel through highly contested territory. Although Five Nations' raiding into the region of the Susquehannock Confederacy was problematic for the Lenape, the rewards to be had from peltry were great. The Five Nations focused their raiding on Susquehannock villages, and bypassed (or missed) Lenape encampments in the Susquehanna Valley.

On May 29, 1663, Andreas Hudde, then in charge at Altena, wrote to Stuyvesant to discuss the alliance between the Lenape and Minquas (Susquehannock) and their mutual war with the Seneca (Five Nations).<sup>72</sup> A vast number of "Sinnecus, 1600 strong, with wives and children" supposedly were marching to the Minquas fort, where 100 River Indians (Lenape) were then resident.<sup>73</sup> These Lenape, formerly the source of runners for the Dutch and once needed maize, became unavailable to risk their lives in carrying mail. The Five Nations' attack was repulsed by June 6, but the effects of this war included raising postal rates. This can be seen in Hudde's message carried by "an Indian,"<sup>74</sup> which stipulated

The bearer of this must have 1 blanket, 4 four handfulls of powder and a stave of lead. These savages have requested me, that I would mention herein, that half of them have already been killed by the Sinnecus; they are savages from Armewamus. I let them take care of the truth of it.

I request also to inform Hendrick Huygen that Erwehongh will shortly come.

A. Hudde.<sup>75</sup>

The goods paid to this carrier were considerable payment for a one-way trip! Further, the comment in Huddle's letter identifying them as members of the Armewamus band—the group who had attacked the Dutch at Fort Nassau in May of 1647—suggests that this carrier was Lenopi.<sup>76</sup> The many scams perpetrated by the Lenopi, mostly specious land sales, appear throughout the colonial record.<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, however, there are indications that a band with a name similar to "Armewamus" may have existed among the Lenape.<sup>78</sup>

During the late spring of 1663 the Susquehannock repelled the Five Nations' raiders. There followed a brief period of quiet along the South River. By June 23 those traditionalist Lenape still foraging in the Delaware Valley had resumed carrying the mail.<sup>79</sup> The mail service was soon again disrupted by problems that reemerged between the Esopus and the faltering Dutch colony. In June of 1663 the Second Esopus War broke out, but hostilities ended by September. A letter of September 1, however, appears to have been sent to New Amsterdam by ship, suggesting that the Lenape mail service still had not resumed. The letter had not left by September 5 as the boat was "detained by bad weather and contrary winds." A letter sent via a Native on December 5, 1663, went unanswered. Another letter sent on December 28 included the hope that letters of December 5 and 6 had arrived, but no surviving document attests to the fate of those missives.<sup>80</sup> The political stresses that had been plaguing the Dutch colony for almost a decade culminated in the demise of the Dutch political interests in the Northeast. In September of 1664 the Dutch relinquished their control of the entire region to the English crown. The details of the transfer took a bit longer, but Dutch hegemony in the Northeast had effectively ended.

The transfer of political power on the Delaware River was fairly orderly, with the English capturing the South River after only a brief skirmish. On October 13, 1664 Sir Robert Carr wrote from the "Dellawarr Fort" to inform Colonel Nicholls that he had taken charge. Included in this communication is the statement that his notification had been delayed because of "the falling of ye Indians from theire former civility, they abuseing messengers that travell by land, since our arrival here."<sup>81</sup> Those messengers were most likely Lenape, while the uncivil Indians were the Lenopi of southern New Jersey. Sir Robert wrote that "80 of them came from ye other side, where they inhabit . . . [and where] noe Christian yet dare venture to plant on that side, wch belongs to ye Duke of Yorke."<sup>82</sup> New Jersey was then part of the holdings of the Duke of York, and the Indians occupying the southern part were the Lenopi (see figure). Sir Robert's message makes very clear that these obstructionist Indians were resident on the east side of the Delaware River. This letter also asked for help in dealing with the "Synekees at ye Fort Ferrania, and ye Huskchanoes here."<sup>83</sup> Sir Robert was well aware that these Indians, identified as "Senecas" [Five Nations] and also Susquehannock raiding parties often did considerable damage while passing through, and left the local Indians to be blamed.<sup>84</sup>

The success of Lenape carriers prior to 1664 became known quite quickly to Sir Robert Carr and other English administrators in this region. Records of postal activities during the decade following the 1664 takeover by the English suggest that the New York route continued to be staffed by Lenape carriers.<sup>85</sup> Along the route between



the South River and Manhattan Island the Lenopi and the Esopus continued to create problems. About September 25, 1671, two Dutch colonists were killed and two named Indians were accused. Messages were sent throughout the region alerting officials of this deed. Hendrick Loaper, also called Henry the Loaper (in Dutch, “walker” or “runner”), carried the letter from the Delaware River up to Fort James in New York.<sup>86</sup> His assigned surname suggests that he was a regular in this service.

## CHANGING POSTAL ENTERPRISES BEFORE WILLIAM PENN UNTIL BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

As previously discussed, the opportunities for the Lenape to alter their economic strategies dated back to the pre-1660 era when Five Nations’ aggression against the Susquehannock provided the Lenape with opportunities to participate fully in the international pelt trade. Around 1660 the number of techniques used by the Lenape to secure access to European goods began a serious shift. Already the European immigrants, with their multiplicity of agrarian and industrial ways, such as mills, had presented a view of life that created stresses on Lenape cultural dynamics. In the early 1660s the end was in sight for the Dutch West India Company. The conflicts that were sparking the Esopus and other Natives around Manhattan Island to generate hostilities indicated to the Lenape another aspect of the deterioration of their “neighborhood.” By the 1730s land sales and other cultural stresses had increased and led to significant changes among the Lenape still operating in their homeland. Various changes in Lenape use of ornaments and burial modes, due to influences by their colonial neighbors, led even the most conservative and traditional Lenape bands to abandon the Delaware Valley. At first individuals, and then families and entire bands, left their traditional foraging zones to become involved in the pelt trade. The many services and trades that various Lenape offered to the colonists required that these immigrants make various economic adjustments. Mail service was only one among these trades. At present the record of mail service in the Delaware Valley in the early 1700s remains mute. We can see a decline in the numbers of Native carriers from a review of the records as well as a considerable increase in costs.<sup>87</sup> What is much less clear is the early development of alternatives, especially in carrying the mail. A brief summary of what we do know of postal enterprises in this period follows.

In 1673 Governor Francis Lovelace of New York established a route between New York and Boston. This monthly postal service was totally inadequate to the growing commercial needs of the individual colonies, but the route became identified as the Boston Post Road. Once the entire contiguous region from present Maine down to Spanish Florida came under English Crown control, providing a shared language, the basis for a single postal service was set.

Increasing coastal trade under the English provided more boats on which mail could be sent. A letter sent by Ephraim Herman on December 27, 1681 “per the Sloop of Capt. Cregier” also mentions his most recent (possibly previous) letter, but not how that message was carried; the use of a sloop in this situation may have been



opportunistic rather than an indication of a regular mail route by sea between these areas.<sup>88</sup>

In Pennsylvania, William Penn's great land-development program established a functioning Quaker-led colony situated between Maryland and New York, which then included New Jersey. A very small aspect of this great experiment was Penn's establishment of a "post office" in 1683. This merely designated a single location through which mail could pass. In general, carrying the mail remained much as it had been in the past, a matter of chance and kindness. But many people recognized that a unified postal system would provide a public benefit.

In 1691, the Englishman Thomas Neale received a twenty-one-year grant from the Crown to establish a postal service that would cover British North America. For the privilege he was contracted to pay the Crown eighty pence per year. However, he never traveled to America, and in 1699 he died while greatly in debt. Before his death he had appointed Governor Andrew Hamilton of New Jersey as Deputy Postmaster General.<sup>89</sup> Hamilton noted that places known as mail drops, the forerunners of post offices, had existed for several years. New York even had established a salaried post for an operator. On May 18, 1697, Hamilton stated that rates for letters were paid in New York money:

a Bitt or Nine-pence that Money, upon every letter from *Philadelphia* to *New-York*, and the same where Distance is Forty Miles from *New-York*, and as much upon every Foreign Letter. I humbly therefore apply myself as above, That this Province would please to take the Post Affair under Consideration, and allow a Salary for some few Years till the Post begin to grow or advance upon the Rate of Inland and Foreign Letters, equal to what is paid at *New-York*.<sup>90</sup>

What became of Hamilton's request is not known.

Pennsylvania's growing population, in addition to an organized system of Quaker meetings, made hand transmission of letters much easier. Perhaps the success of this informal system is one reason why we lack records of postal developments in most of colonial Pennsylvania. In the northern parts of New England, away from the coastal route, delivery delays for mail were considerable.<sup>91</sup> For example, a letter sent "by Express" to Gov. Dummer in Boston on September 21, 1725 from nearby York (now in Maine) arrived on September 24. Dummer's reply suggests that some type of regular mail service was already in operation, but the delay indicates problems with the service. Drummer noted that "there was nothing in the Letter that required Such a Charge but it might have come as well by the Ordinary Post." An "Exprece" sent on March 21, 1727 arrived "by ye hand of Liutn Wright, April 5th."<sup>92</sup> There are no records known of speedy deliveries in that period, and no regular Native carriers.<sup>93</sup>

The rights to operate the colonial postal "system," more than any achievements in developing an effective operation, ultimately passed to Alexander Spotswood (1676–1740), Lieutenant Governor of Virginia from 1710 to 1722. In 1730 he became the deputy postmaster general of the colonies. Near the end of his term he appointed the young Benjamin Franklin as postmaster in the city of Philadelphia. Franklin exerted considerable effort in managing a depot out of his house while his wife, Deborah,

managed his business affairs. Franklin actually developed a system that operated among the several colonies, selected routes for the Post Road (now US Route 1). The functioning of this system in the 1750s is described by Fry.<sup>94</sup> Local towns or cities figured out their own systems for expediting mail service, but road construction remained rare and retarded carriers. Slowly the Boston Post Road was extended, with the process being locally dependent. By 1758 a "Post Road to Amboy" was operating, but the development of a mail service was very slow.<sup>95</sup> Many of these woes related specifically to land holdings and border disputes. These were particularly problematic along the southern and western margins of what became Pennsylvania. Despite these delays, by 1760 the system had begun to show a profit.

### PAYING NATIVE "POSTAGE"

For early Lenape postal carriers, the round trip from the Philadelphia area to New Amsterdam commonly had involved the payment of a pair of stockings. By 1600 the stocking frame, a type of knitting machine, had been invented by William Lee. Stockings became one of the important products of the English industrial revolution.<sup>96</sup> De Rasière, in describing Natives on or around Manhattan Island, provides the only known early ethnographic description of their use of stockings "which they make of deer or elk skins, which they know how to prepare very broad and soft, and wear in the winter time."<sup>97</sup> Stockings among the Lenape had a lower priority than other goods, but the value of a pair was seen as a fair price for carrying the post to Manhattan during much of the Dutch colonial period.

The year 1674 saw an effort by the Dutch to reconquer parts of their territories in the middle Atlantic coastal area, engendering new stresses among the colonists. In 1674 the new English Governor, Edmund Andros, wrote a letter to Captain Edmund Cantwell at the fort at New Castle, carried by an Indian, which voiced various administrative and military concerns. The letter noted, "In an inclosed paper the messenger hath had here a pr of Shooes[,] one hundred guildrs for a horse, 1 ½ lbs. powder, 6 lbs. bread besides boat hire, 20d to go after."<sup>98</sup> This enormous payment for this one-way trip reflects renewed Dutch hostilities and the military urgency of the message. Pennsylvania archives editor Samuel Hazard interprets another phrase in this document to read "to go to After Cull" (Achter Col), which names that location as part of the route taken.<sup>99</sup> Achter Coll is an inland New Jersey location to the west of Manhattan Island, so the carrier's route would include ferry crossings near the middle of the island.

On April 25, 1675, Governor Andros, in New York, again wrote a letter to Captain Cantwell on the South River. On April 30 Cantwell sent an "express" letter in return, indicating that "Two Hours since I recd yors of the 25th by two Indians Sent Express."<sup>100</sup> The notation that Cantwell's reply was also sent "Express" indicates that the return postage was not included in the original payment. The cost of this speedy reply is uncertain, but the payment for the first message could be seen as excessive. Possibly the carriers were making payment demands much greater than they could have expected from the Dutch, and the English had no alternatives. A document

dated December 1, 1675, records the payment of “12 Ells duffels” made to “4 Indyans” without specifying the service or items provided.<sup>101</sup> Twelve ells of fabric would allow for the fashioning of four very ample coats.<sup>102</sup>

In the 1690s Gabriel Thomas indicated that costs for goods such as stockings were high in the Delaware Valley because locally there were few colonial women available in the labor force, and they were paid high rates for knitting.<sup>103</sup> The payment “for Knitting a very Course [sic] pair of York Stockings, they have half a Crown a pair.”<sup>104</sup> Half a crown, or 2.5 shillings, was a considerable value, but probably included raising the sheep, shearing, carding and spinning the wool, as well as doing the actual knitting. Robert Duplessis’s extremely important research includes a long summary of his impressive data related to stockings produced in Europe for sale, derived from his review of masses of data relating to cloth used in the Indian trade.<sup>105</sup> In comparison, wages for carpenters, bricklayers, and skilled crafters were five to six shillings per day at that time, or as much as one pound sterling per week, while laborers earned only 14 to 15 pounds per year.<sup>106</sup>

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The traditional trust that was placed in traveling strangers to carry messages may have been extended to Natives going about their normal business. I have noted elsewhere the extent of Native participation in carrying messages for the various colonies;<sup>107</sup> only further documentary research specific to a tribe or specific area will reveal the extent and possible regularity of those carriers. The role of Indians in carrying the mail now is best documented for the Lenape of southeastern Pennsylvania. Many years of study of the Lenape of the colonial period have enabled me to identify many references to this “profession,” but it is not simply the number of references that identifies the Lenape as preferred carriers. During the colonial period many letter writers clearly indicated a preference for Lenape runners, and recommended them to other colonists.<sup>108</sup>

Furthermore, a number of geographical and ecological factors account for the early colonists’ development of a regular postal system that provided the Lenape with the opportunity to demonstrate their skill and reliability in this enterprise. The extent of Dutch hegemony, extending on either side of present New Jersey, created a need for communication between the lower parts of the Delaware Valley and Manhattan Island. The length of the sea route, with an extensive ocean passage, created a demand for a more reliable and cheaper connection for diplomatic letters. This demand could be well served by able runners willing to travel through the territories of two or more tribes that were generally, but not always, at peace. By 1640 Lenape runners became the mainstay of this service.

The utility of a mail service between these centers of trade and commerce, and the dangers often involved in traversing this route, continued for another two centuries after 1664, the effective end of the Dutch period in the Northeast. Even as the early United States Postal Service developed within the new country, the westward expansion provided opportunities for Natives to maintain important communication routes. These skills continued to be demonstrated by the Lenape. By 1800 the

Lenape generally had become identified as “Delaware.” Their post-carrying skills had been expanded to include the many roles served by Native scouts during the Plains Wars, and also as adjuncts to the military during the Civil War. Carrying mail through hostile territory may have been even more dangerous than conducting military reconnaissance.<sup>109</sup> By 1900 the rapid increase in the size of the United States and its territories were being met by an effectively growing United States Postal Service. The role of the Lenape early in this development, and the standards that they had set for speed and reliability, form an important part of our national history.

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14. See fig. 1. Isaak De De Rasiere's letter [ca. 1613], in *Three Visitors to Early Plymouth. Letters about the Pilgrim Settlement in New England During its First Seven Years*, ed. Sydney James, 2nd ed. (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1997), 63–80, suggests that only Lenape bands were in contact with the early Dutch operating in this area. Also see Marshall Joseph Becker, "Lenopi; or, What's in a Name? Interpreting the Evidence for Cultures and Cultural Boundaries in the Lower Delaware Valley," *Bulletin of the Archaeological Society of New Jersey* 63 (2008): 11–32.

15. Isaak De Rasière, letter ca. 1628, in *Three Visitors to Early Plymouth*, 63–80.

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58. Gehring, *New York Historical Manuscripts, Dutch Volumes XVIII–XIX. Delaware Papers*, 232; Fernow, *Documents Relating to the History and Settlement of the Towns along the Hudson and Mohawk*, 699.

59. Browne, *Archives of Maryland, Volume III*, 425.

60. Fernow, *Documents Relative to the History of the Dutch and Swedish Settlements*, 343.

61. *Ibid.*, 344; Fernow, *Documents Relating to the History and Settlement of the Towns along the Hudson and Mohawk*, 700.

62. Gehring, *New York Historical Manuscripts, Dutch Volumes XVIII–XIX. Delaware Papers*, 233–34, 242.

63. Fernow, *Documents Relating to the History and Settlement of the Towns along the Hudson and Mohawk*, 711.

64. Peter Kock is believed to have been resident in the Nevesinck area; Gehring, *New York Historical Manuscripts, Dutch Volumes XVIII–XIX. Delaware Papers*, 242–43; see also Fernow, *Documents Relating to the History and Settlement of the Towns along the Hudson and Mohawk*, 712–13.

65. Gehring, *New York Historical Manuscripts, Dutch Volumes XVIII–XIX. Delaware Papers*, 242.

66. Fernow, *Documents Relating to the History and Settlement of the Towns along the Hudson and Mohawk*, 714.

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69. *Ibid.*, 717–18, 729.



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71. See Becker, “Lenape (‘Delaware’) in the Early Economy,” 117–20; Becker, “The Prinzhof (36DE3),” 77–83.
72. Fernow, *Documents Relating to the History and Settlement of the Towns along the Hudson and Mohawk*, 729.
73. Fernow, *Documents Relative to the History of the Dutch and Swedish Settlements*, 430.
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